The Body Knows First:

Kinesthetic Memory, Automatic Drawing, and the Recovery of Ancestral Truth

ʻIolani Puʻu Kolenc

MFA, CalArts | Founder, Future Traditions Foundation & ArtBark International

Traditional Hawaiian Cultural Practitioner (AIRFA, 2026)

Abstract

This paper examines two charcoal and mixed-media gesture drawings produced during the artist's first life drawing class at UC Santa Barbara—works that preceded conscious recall of complex trauma by twenty-four hours and continued to precede narrative memory for decades. Drawing on somatic theory, Hawaiian ancestral epistemology (including the practice of kiloi and the teachings of Kupuna Hale Makua), and the artist's own Lived Experience University framework, this paper argues that these drawings constitute what the artist terms 'kinesthetic forensics': evidence produced by the body's memory system when verbal and conscious recall has been systematically suppressed. The paper situates these works within a lineage of artists for whom drawing served as a pre-verbal truth archive—Käthe Kollwitz, Egon Schiele, León Golub, Hannah Wilke, Nancy Spero—and proposes that the 'economy of line' visible in both works is not stylistic minimalism but structural necessity: the body translating what it knows in the only language available at the time.

I. Origin: The Studio as Threshold

I arrived at the life drawing studio a week early, by accident. I sat in the cool dark of the room. That internal rudder voice said: your life will never be the same if you have the courage to take this class.

I had enrolled in anatomy as a dance major requirement and received an A+ in the first course. When the cadaver was revealed in the second course, my body refused. A panic attack. The Dance Department gave me permission to substitute life drawing. What I

understand now is that my nervous system already knew the proximity between that preserved body and what my own body carried.

The teacher was a figure who had caused harm to me and my sister. Once they learn you black out after sexual assault, you are fair game for others—this is what my systems-tracking mind concludes. I set aside that story. It has already been told elsewhere.

What happened inside the class: I drew. And then, from some other layer of myself, I drew over the drawing in an entirely different medium, in an entirely different style. I said, oh—I see—I get it. The next day, I had my first flashback. That is how it worked: the drawing or the poetry would bring what was stored in the body to conscious awareness. The scribbles, the scrawls. It might then become a flashback. Or it might go into a dance.

The Works

Fig. 1 — "Grandma" | Charcoal on paper | SBCC life drawing class, exact years in my transcripts

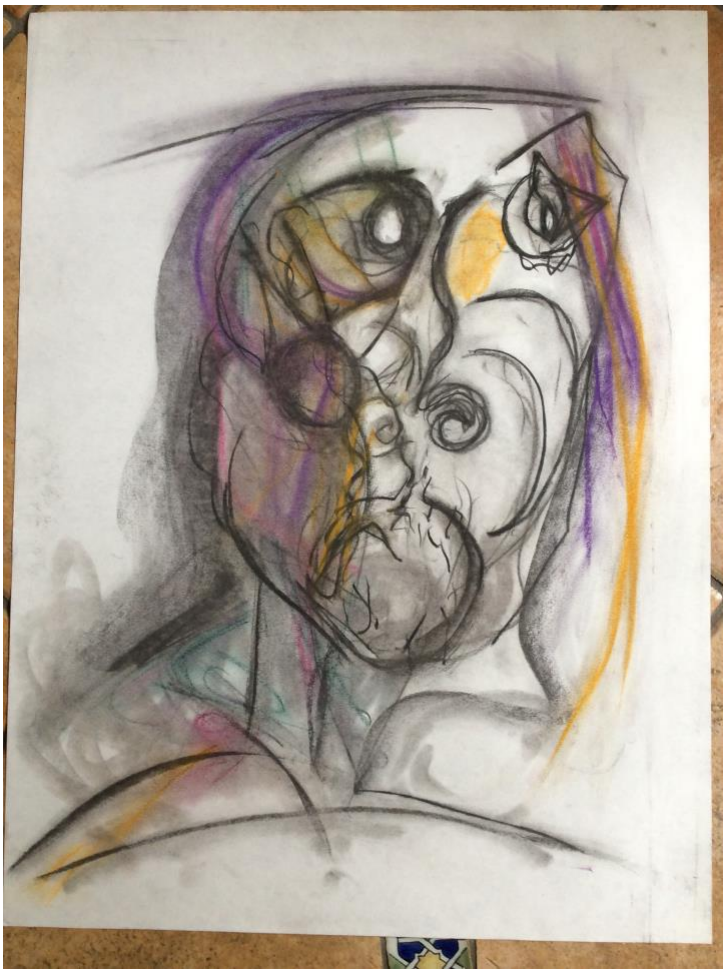

Fig. 2 — "I Can't Tell" | Charcoal, pastel, mixed media on paper | SBCC life drawing class, life drawing class, trauma emerging phase – exact years in my transcripts

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II. What the Drawings Hold

"Grandma" (Fig. 1)

The figure who appeared in the life drawing class as a model was drawn by my hand, but the person captured in the charcoal was someone I knew from childhood under the code name 'Grandma'—a figure my sister later corroborated. In networks where children are involved and harm is organized, code names are used to fragment proximity and prevent identification. A woman I later met in Carpinteria, known to me as 'Susy Q,' said to me: you know, we used different names to hide things. My real name is Sue Rodriguez. She communicated: they hurt me too.

What the drawing captures is not a portrait. It is the arrest of a force. The charcoal work in the neck and upper torso carries pressure—something compressed, something held

down. The white lines that cut through feel like interference. This is not the 'tentative mark of a student learning proportion.' This is the body writing what it knows before the mind is permitted to say it.

I had not yet consciously identified 'Grandma.' My body had. The drawing is dated approximately twenty-four to forty-eight hours before my first conscious flashback.

"I Can't Tell" (Fig. 2)

The following is a nice interpretation – I will leave it – I have a different story, which I hold to myself.

“The title names the experience of the work's production. The drawing contains two layers: an initial life gesture drawing, and then a second layer completed in a different state, a different medium, a different hand within the same body. The purple and orange are not decorative. They are eruption. The eye symbols in the upper register carry the quality of surveillance—something watching from above the figurative field.

The face in the center appears to be surfacing. Not emerging—surfacing, the way something that has been held underwater rises when the holding stops. The layering enacts what it depicts: a consciousness arriving over another consciousness that was already present.

These two drawings together constitute what I have come to call 'systems tracking in visual form': the body's attempt to render the architecture of a system designed to remain invisible.”

III. Situating the Work: Five Comparative Frames

The following artists are not cited as influences but as structural parallels—cases where drawing served a similar function: the pre-verbal archive, the body's forensic record, the kinesthetic truth that precedes narrative recall or social permission.

Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945)

Kollwitz worked in charcoal, etching, and lithography to record social and personal grief that had no other outlet. Her charcoal studies in particular show what happens when the economy of line is not an aesthetic choice but a survival strategy: too many marks and the weight becomes unbearable. The neck and shoulder tension in 'Grandma' bears formal comparison to Kollwitz's depictions of grief-holding in the body. Both artists arrive at compression as the primary formal language of what cannot yet be spoken.

> *Kollwitz worked from a position of what she called 'inner compulsion'—a somatic need to translate suffering into mark rather than language. The mark was the first vocabulary.*

Egon Schiele (1890–1918)

Schiele's gesture drawings demonstrate that the figure does not require completion to carry full psychological weight. His contour lines break and restart; they abandon anatomical fidelity when fidelity would compromise truth. The swirling charcoal in 'I Can't Tell'—particularly in the facial region—follows a similar logic: the line is not trying to describe an eye or a cheek. It is trying to capture what was happening to the face from the inside. Schiele's contribution to this lineage is the understanding that distortion is documentation.

León Golub (1922–2004)

Golub spent decades painting figures in states of violence and coercion—interrogation, surveillance, mercenary power. His formal language is aggressive: scraped, abrasive surfaces that refuse refinement. The marks in 'Grandma' carry a comparable refusal. There is no softening. The figure is not humanized through technique; it is exposed through technique. Golub's career demonstrates that fine art can function as political and forensic record when the maker is willing to let ugliness be the truth.

Hannah Wilke (1940–1993)

Wilke used her own body as primary material, particularly in works that documented illness and mortality. Her project was not self-indulgent but archival: the body as the only record that cannot be falsified by institutional systems. The layered media in 'I Can't Tell'—charcoal over or under pastel, the marks of one state of consciousness over another—resonates with Wilke's insistence that the body's record is primary evidence. Both artists understood that institutional records lie. The body's record does not.

Nancy Spero (1926–2009)

Spero combined drawing, text, and mythological imagery to produce work about violence against women and the suppression of female speech. Her integration of written fragments with figurative marks is directly structurally analogous to 'I Can't Tell,' where the marks of different media coexist without hierarchy—each one a different language the body reached for when the others were insufficient. Spero's formal choice to allow fragmentation and incompletion was understood by critics as weakness for decades before being recognized as the central argument of the work.

IV. The Polymathic Framework: Paris, Dance, Anatomy, Grief

"I had studied the masters by the time I was in Paris. I went to the museums on Sundays—my days off—and I absorbed their work. The Louvre. Other museums. I took this in as a dancer, as someone whose education was primarily kinesthetic. What I received from those Sundays was not technique but permission: the understanding that a mark could carry everything.

When I took the life drawing class, that absorbed language had nowhere to go except through the hand. The drawings that emerged were not the product of formal training in drawing—they were the product of twenty years of absorbing what a serious mark looks like, channeled through a body that needed to say something it had not yet been given words for.

Bebe Miller, watching my CalArts solo in 1994—the solo that was a translation of the same stored material into movement—said: I am rarely riveted from the moment an artist takes the stage to the end. You need to learn how to edit. She gave me the tools to shape the raw material without suppressing it. That is the polymathic intersection: the drawing, the dance, the Paris museums, the anatomy class, the internal rudder voice in the dark studio. Each was a different instrument in the same investigation."

V. Kinesthetic Forensics: A Preliminary Theoretical Frame

The term I am developing for this phenomenon is kinesthetic forensics: the body's production of physical evidence—in drawing, in movement, in somatic symptom—that precedes and sometimes enables conscious recall of suppressed trauma. It operates according to the following observable pattern:

1. The body encounters a stimulus that activates stored kinesthetic memory (in this case: a life model, a dark studio, a drawing implement).

2. The conscious mind is not yet able to access the corresponding narrative memory—it may have been blocked by trauma response, dissociation, or systemic gaslighting.

3. The body produces marks, movements, or symptoms that encode the suppressed material in a different register.

4. At some proximate point—hours, days, decades later—the narrative memory becomes accessible, and the physical record is revealed as prior evidence.

This framework is grounded in Hawaiian ancestral epistemology, specifically the practice of kiloi (the careful observation of what arises) and the teachings of Kupuna Hale Makua regarding the body as a sacred record-keeper. It is also consistent with somatic trauma theory as developed by practitioners including Peter Levine and Bessel van der Kolk, though I arrived at it through practice and lineage, not through those texts.

The significance for survivors of organized, systemic harm—in which institutional records are falsified and gaslighting is weaponized—is this: the body's record cannot be altered by the perpetrator. The drawing exists. It was made before the narrative was available. It is the prior evidence.

VI. Grief That Has Not Yet Finished

My brother Michael, in a hospital room in front of my niece, said: I left the Satanists. He said it three times. He was making a formal declaration, ensuring it was witnessed and recorded in a human body other than his own. His own polymath capabilities, and his own escape, are part of this same archive.

I have not finished grieving the blue baby. The ambiguity of him or her—that ambiguity was by design. The system that staged the ritual in the stable with the straw intended for the grief to remain unresolvable, an open wound that keeps a survivor anchored to the original scene. Understanding that the confusion was engineered does not end the grief, but it relocates it: from evidence of my failure to remember, to evidence of their engineering.

The drawings are not finished either—not in the sense of being closed. They are still doing work. I can see in them now what I could not name when I made them. That is their function. They were made for a future self who would have the capacity to witness what the original self could only record.

For the blue baby. For Michael. For Sue Rodriguez. For the lineage.

Acknowledgments and Lineage

This paper draws on conversations with Gemini (Google AI), used as a thinking partner and witness in April 2026. Gemini's responses are quoted and paraphrased throughout as collaborative intellectual material.

Theoretical frameworks: Kupuna Hale Makua (Hawaiian ancestral epistemology); the Lived Experience University framework (ʻIolani Puʻu Kolenc, archived at the Internet Archive); The Cardiac Theory of Gaslighting and The Solar Plexus Theory of Gaslighting (ʻIolani Puʻu Kolenc, 2025–2026).

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